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Lesbian Feminist: Selections from the Archive
of Dr. Angela Bowen (1936-2018)*

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“We Must Witness One Another”

By Eve Oishi¹

I first saw Angela Bowen in March 1995 on stage at the *Black Nations/Queer Nations?* conference sponsored by Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at the City University of New York Graduate Center. She was sitting on the dais next to South African activist Simon Nkoli and Afro-Caribbean scholar M. Jacqui Alexander and talking about the need for a global movement of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people in the African diaspora. Shari Frilot, my partner at the time, was commissioned to make a documentary of the conference,² and several of Angela's quotes were featured in the documentary, including one in which she makes a plea for coalition and community as a mode of survival in the face of increasing racism and homophobia, saying: “We must witness one another. We must be there for one another. We must watch each other's backs.” Over the next several months, as Shari worked on cuts of the video, I would hear Angela's voice repeating these words until they were seared into my memory. I can still call up every inflection of her phrasing: the strong, declarative statement, the firm yet open challenge.

We met the next year, in one of those strange twists of fate, across a dinner table in Maine, where we had, both been invited to speak. Despite our thirty-year age difference, we were both finishing our doctoral programs and were on the job market, and we discovered through casual conversation that we had both been short-listed for a position in Women's Studies at California State University Long Beach. The search committee was suitably impressed with us that they successfully lobbied to hire us both. Angela began the next year in a joint position with English and Women's Studies, and I followed a year later, after completing a postdoctoral fellowship, with an appointment in Women's Studies. We were the first women of color to be hired in the department and, as Angela chronicles in [this talk](#), we developed the “U.S. Women of Color” course through email correspondence in the year before I arrived.

While I imagine that the hiring committee's decision was based on the fact that we brought such different strengths to the university due to our distinct areas of research and experience, the university turned out to be a less flexible and far-sighted institution than it thought itself to be. Powerful voices in the English department could not conceive of allowing African American authors into the canon, and Angela had to fight to get a single author course on Toni Morrison approved. I remember Angela relating to me with frustration the fact that, although the department offered several single author seminars on white writers, including F. Scott Fitzgerald and all of his “four and a half novels,” members of the department objected to a seminar on Morrison (who had won both the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes at this point) whose books one professor characterized as “beach reading.” I suspect that this battle was the final straw that led her to change her faculty line into a full appointment in Women's Studies.

Unfortunately, the Women's Studies department harbored its own challenges and hostilities. Although she and I had been hired at the same time, Angela began her appointment a year before me, and I watched her go through her tenure review a year before me. Women's Studies

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² *Black Nations/Queer Nations?* dir. Shari Frilot, Third World Newsreel, 1995.

was still a relatively new field at that time, and despite its roots in activism and its claims to be connected to community work, it still functioned on a very traditional academic model in terms of tenure and promotion. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the peer-reviewed academic article or book was still the only metric that was respected. When Angela came up for tenure, the majority of her department review committee recommended tenure, but one member of the committee took the extraordinary step of lobbying the Retention, Tenure and Promotion Committee of the College of Liberal Arts on behalf of her minority opinion, arguing that Angela's scholarly record did not deserve tenure. The committee split the difference and granted her tenure without promotion, a devastating blow with serious economic consequences for someone late in her career who was still the primary economic provider for several family members and who would soon face a degenerative illness that would require long-term care. Maythee Rojas and I were the two junior faculty members in the department on the tenure-track, and Angela took us out to lunch to tell us about her tenure decision and to make us aware of what we would need to be prepared for in our own tenure reviews. She did not hide her anger or her disappointment, but this was also an act of mentoring on her part. Both of us made it through our tenure reviews successfully, partly because Angela's advice caused me to stay vigilant and relentless in my own preparation and mentoring and partly because the hostility to and fear of Black women in academia, even in Women's Studies, was greater than any equivalent feelings about Asian American or Latinx women. I had only my observations and my gut instinct to support the latter statement until it was proven affirmatively several years later, after I had left the department, when the second Black woman to be hired by the department was also denied promotion, this time without tenure.

While this story does not emerge as primary in Angela's archive, I feel strongly that it be told because, while we celebrate the accomplishments and historical significance of her work as a groundbreaking Black lesbian scholar activist artist, we also need to acknowledge the cost of being ahead of one's time. While Angela was arguably the first Audre Lorde scholar and wrote the first dissertation on Lorde's work, she was asked by Lorde's estate not to publish her dissertation due to the scarcity thinking of an early field. Today, with re-printings, scholarly editions and monographs being welcomed by old and new readers of Lorde, the belief that an academic or literary marketplace does not have room for more than one work about Lorde seems hard to imagine. We need to remember that it is due to the diligent organizing, writing and support of Angela Bowen, including the reasons that her name is less well-known, that such a flowering is now possible.

Similarly, Angela entered the field of Women's Studies at the moment of its emergence, when it was trying to find the balance between institutional legitimacy and its activist roots. The thought and care that she put into Women's Studies as a political academic project was a critical part of its formative history (see the materials in the "Women's Studies and Interdisciplinarity" section of this issue.) While she stood firmly in the camp of maintaining the label Women's Studies, as opposed to the new labels of Gender, Feminist and/or Sexuality Studies that have since been added, reading deeply into her archive shows us that this stance was not about a limited view of gender categories but a fierce and continuous urging for the field not to marginalize the voices of Black women and other women of color whose activist, artistic, and scholarly contributions were a vital yet often overlooked foundation of the field. Her perspective was rooted in her years of community activism, begun long before her career as an academic, yet her analysis needs no updating to make it relevant and urgent in the year of uprisings following the murder of George Floyd. While Women's Studies has grown and changed and continues to face challenges, its impact on scholarship and academic institutions cannot be questioned. Angela's story reminds us

that this is more than a triumphant narrative of progress. In the fight for institutional legitimacy, blood was left on the floor, much of it drawn by those within our own ranks.

I was Angela's colleague for nine years, and I knew her as a friend, a mentor, an elder, and a collaborator. The last time I saw her was to celebrate her 82nd birthday, about five months before she passed. I did not know at the time that I would be spending hours with her in spirit, digging deep into her archive, learning about her early life, and hearing her distinctive voice, unchanged in its force, its clarity of vision and of purpose, speaking to me through her writing. It has been an honor and a gift to meet her again this way, even from a distance, like the first time over twenty-five years ago. She has not changed one bit.